

New Understanding by TrashFan

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Summary:

Max takes Eleven to her first house party, and when the two get separated, things turn out a lot worse than they had ever imagined.

New Understanding

Author's Note:

Read tags for trigger warnings

I understand why the boys need to have Guys Night. The four of them make Max and me feel very welcome and I'm glad to have them as friends, but they were a party long before we came into the picture. Mike explained to me that every once in a while they wanted to have some time with just the boys like it used to be. It isn't my favorite thing but I get it.

What I don't understand is why Max wants to spend the evening in this house. We almost always spend Guys Night together, but usually we just watch movies or talk or she answers my questions about things I don't want to mention in front of the rest. But yesterday she told me that Mack Jenkins was having a “rager” at his place and she wanted to take me to my first ever party. I told her we were already in a party, but she said it's not like that. As we were walking over she told me that I wasn't allowed to go into a room with anyone alone, that I shouldn't drink too much, and that I should only drink things I open myself. Other than that, she just wants me to “dance and have fun.”

I'm not sure how I'm supposed to be dancing, this is nothing like the Snow Ball. Everyone's crowded too close together and there are hardly any lights on, so maybe they're trying to save on the energy bill. But when we got here Max said that all of Billy's ragers were like this too, so maybe it's a party thing. I miss her. When we got in she had me try a little sip of what looked like water but tasted like poison. After I spit it out on the ground, she laughed and told me she'd go find me some pop.

Since then I've just been leaning on this wall watching people. Mike says I shouldn't call it “watching people” because it sounds creepy, but that's how I learn what I should do at different times. I watch a boy and a girl across the room dance together in a way I don't think would have been allowed at the Snow Ball. A few guys have tried to dance with me like that, but I don't think my body moves like that so

I just stood there until they walked away.

Max said that we could leave the second I want to, so I think I'll ask her when she comes back. I don't hate it here, it's just loud and boring. I've been standing against the wall for a long time now, I wonder how far away the drinks are. I ask a swaying guy next to me and he points me towards a doorway that's emitting a little more light than the rest of the house. It takes me a few minutes just to make my way through the living room because there are so many people in here and everyone keeps shoving me.

I make it into the kitchen and look around. Over there, I see the pops. There's a clear path to the Orange Tabs, but a long line for something else that someone is pumping from a barrel. It looks like dirty spit. When I'm halfway to the drinks, I hear a voice I recognize.

"For the last time Freddy, I'm not giving you another one. You're way too fucked already, go sit down for a while."

I make my way towards the voice as the guy I'm guessing is Freddy argues slowly. Maybe I won't ask Max to leave after all, since I have another friend here now! I break through the line up to my friend standing near the drink barrel.

"Hi!" I say.

He turns his head towards me and smiles for a second before his entire expression changes. "El! What the hell are you doing here?!"

"Harrington, how do you know this kid?" says a girl at the front of the line.

"That's a long story, but she's like a friend of a friend."

"She's cute," Freddy said, and Steve hit him hard.

"She's thirteen, pervert. Lay off or I'll break your fucking dick off."

"Sorry man, didn't know," he mumbles before walking off, tripping twice in four steps.

Steve turns back to me. "Seriously kid, why are you at a high school

party? Do you even know what this is?"

I stand up taller and square my shoulders. "Yes I do. Max says this is a rager."

"Are you kidding me? Max is here too? Jesus Christ."

"Jesus isn't here, Hop said he died almost two thousand years ago," I say, eager to show him I'm not the idiot he thinks I am.

Steve sighs and runs a hand through his hair. "Fucking hell, okay. I'm gonna go find some guys and ask what drinks we're short on, and then I'm driving you guys home. Thank god I haven't done shots yet. Brandon, if I find out you let Freddy at the keg, I'll kill you." He calls out before shaking his head at me. "Gather Max up and tell her that you two are leaving."

I don't like the way he's talking to me, but it's becoming clear that he won't hang out with me and I don't want to be bored again, so I don't fight him. I walk into another room connected to the other side of the kitchen, but it's foggy and smelly and I start coughing, so after I'm sure there's no shock of red hair in sight, I leave. I check the bathroom and front porch, but I still can't see her. I'm starting to get worried when I notice a staircase. Oh good, she's just upstairs.

It isn't until I'm at the top of the steps that my relief goes away. There are no lights on up here and I can't hear any sounds, so I guess this isn't part of the party after all. I sigh and shuffle my feet along the fuzzy cream carpet. Steve is going to be mad at me when he finds out he has to look for Max himself, but I don't see any other way we can find her. He's taller than me and he probably knows the house better anyway, so he'll have an easier time. I'm about to turn back to the stairs when I hear a voice.

"You were totally right dude, there is more here than meets the eyes," came a deep, gruff chuckle.

"I told you, I can tell the hot ones even through their clothes," says a second voice.

I sigh yet again. There's so much about this world I don't get. I'll have

to ask someone later. And then I hear it.

“Get off! I swear to god I'll send Billy after your sorry asses if you don't let go of me!” It's Max's voice, the one she uses when she's really scared but trying to sound tough. I immediately run down the hallway, trying to figure out which of the five doors they're behind.

“Billy doesn't give a shit and you know it,” comes the first voice again. “but enough playing around. Let's get to the good stuff.”

And then Max shrieks and I can feel energy pump through my veins. I squeeze my eyes close, let out a shout, and all five doors slam open. I see quick movement from the second one on the right and I stalk right through it. What I see inside makes me more furious than I have been in a very long time.

Two big, wide guys are pinning Max against the wall and their hands are on her bare stomach. Her shirt and bra are pulled clear up around her neck and she's kicking and screaming and crying and my vision goes red.

“No, I swear to god I'll kill you, stop!” she's saying, but it's mostly just a sob. The boys laugh, and that's all it takes.

“She. Said. No.” I don't shout it, but it echoes around the room just like I want it to. The guys turn their heads to me and smile, but it's not a kind smile at all.

“Oh good,” that first one says, his thin scruffy beard dripping with spit. “We both have one.”

They both take a step towards me and I smile. Good, their hands are off Max, no chance I'll miss my shot. She's trying to shout something at me, but I ignore her.

I take a breath, close my eyes, and let out a scream. It starts low but I let it build and build and build until I hear the cracks and thumps I'm waiting for. I can feel the blood flowing freely from both of my nostrils, and I wipe it away as I open my eyes. Both boys are unmoving on the floor and Max is still against the wall, her mouth hanging open.

"Did you k-kill them?" she says as she hurries to yank her shirt down.

"No."

"What the hell did you do then?"

I shrug. "They were laughing at you. So I broke their jaws."

Max blinks once. "Oh. Okay."

Now that I don't have to worry about the mouth-breathers, I take a good look at Max. The mascara she put on before we left is running down her cheeks and her eyes are bright red. Her pink lip gloss is smeared on her chin, and I notice that just a few inches below it she has some bite marks and red-brown bruises forming on her neck. I look down and bite my lip at what else I see.

"Max?"

"Y-yeah?"

I shift my weight into my other foot. "Your fly is undone."

She hurries to fix it and then scratches the back of her neck. "It wasn't what it looked like El. Nothing happened, they didn't..." she trails off and ends her sentence in a shrug.

I'm about to ask what all did happen, but rapid footsteps slam up the stairs. None other than Steve Harrington flies through the door and stops short when he sees us.

"Shit. I was hoping the scream wasn't you guys." He looks at my bloody face, Max's tear stains, and then he stops at the crumpled figures on the floor. "Uh, El? Are they...?"

"They're not dead, I promise."

Steve walks slowly over to the boys and presses on each of their shoulders until they're lying face up. He swears under his breath. "Figures it's Wesson and Stratford. Douches."

"Douches," I repeat. I look up at Max, and for the first time I notice

she's shaking, her arms wrapped around her stomach.

Steve follows my glance and his eyes land on her as well. "Shit Max. What did they do to you?"

He takes a step towards her, but she stumbles backwards. "Nothing. They did nothing, El got here in time.

"Max," he says softly as he touches his own neck. "Look at you. Something happened before she got here."

"No. It didn't. Can we just get the hell out of here already? This party is lame."

Steve pauses before nodding. "Yeah, I guess we should get you out of here. C'mon, I'll drive you."

The three of us walk to the car in complete silence. Some guys try to talk to Steve on the way out, but he either ignores them or doesn't hear them. I slide into the seat behind the driver's, and to my surprise Max climbs in to my right instead of taking shotgun. Steve looks back at her for a minute, but when she stares at the ground instead of meeting his eyes, he sighs and starts the car. The ride continues with no one speaking. I don't understand everything that happened. I don't know what the bruises on her neck are or why the boys were doing that, but I know it was disgusting. A while ago when I found redness in my underwear, Hop had Mrs. Byers give me something he called "the talk." She told me about puberty and reproduction, and she said that one of the worst things a person could do to is force someone to be intimate when they don't want to be. When she first said that I didn't believe her; I had seen so many terrible things at the lab, having someone touch you gently didn't sound that bad at all. But after seeing Max's face tonight, part of me wishes I had broken their necks instead of their jaws. I look over at her. Her arms are crossed over her chest and she's rubbing her forearms with her hands. Her chin is set solidly forward, but tears are falling down her cheeks freely.

"Max..."

"Don't," she spits. "Don't."

Steve turns his head around for a second and inhales when he sees her. “Kiddo, you—”

“Shut up! Nothing happened, okay? El got there in time. Everything's fine, and we're all gonna pretend like tonight didn't happen.”

“But it did Max,” Steve says gently. “Even if it didn't get as bad as it could have, something obviously happened. It's not just gonna go away.”

“Why not?”

“Because it doesn't work that way and you know it.”

Max wipes furiously at the tear streaks, but they're immediately replaced. “It was my idea to go to that stupid party anyway.”

I clear my throat. “They are the bad ones, not you.”

Steve nods. “El's right.”

“Okay, so they're dicks. Whatever. It's over now, can we just let it go?”

“I'm not going to make you tell me about it kid, but two seniors trying to mess with an eighth grader isn't okay.”

“Yeah, I get it!”

“I know those guys, and they have a nasty streak of never learning their lesson,” Steve says.

“How is that my problem?” Max spits.

He glances back at her as he says, “We could go to the Chief.”

She laughs humorlessly. “And explain to him that I took the girl that's pretty much his daughter to a place packed with drugs and booze? I'll pass, thanks.”

“What would you say if it were me?” I cut in. “What would you want me to do?”

She opens her mouth to say something, but immediately closes it. "It's different."

"No it's not."

"Gotta agree with Eleven on this one," Steve calls quietly.

Max is still for a moment before her head falls forward into her hands and she lets out the first audible sob of the car ride. I place my hand on her back, and while she initially flinches away, after a second she leans into my shoulder. I can feel her trembling, and she's car too cold for the humid night.

"L-l-ucas is gonna k-kill me."

"No he won't," Steve shoots back immediately.

"Yes he will. I went to the stupid party, I went to get drinks alone, and I got myself carried up there. He's gonna hate me."

Steve exhales, and I swear I can hear physical pain in that one small sound. "He's not going to hate you. You know why? Because the actions of two absolute dirt bags are not your fault. Lucas is a good guy, he'll understand that. I promise. I promise you Max, it's all gonna be okay. "

After that, the rest of the night becomes a blur. I don't take in exactly what happens, but I know I'm directing Steve to the station. I know what's going on when Max can't make herself stand up out of the car, so Steve gently wraps one arm behind her shoulders and one under her knees and carries her in himself. I try not to, but I hear every word he says as he whispers to her that everything will be okay. I understand the look in Hop's eyes as he takes in the sight of the three of us, and I get why Steve's first words are, "It's not El, Hop. Just Max," and I understand why Hop's first response is "*Not El*," before he switches into police mode.

I still don't understand parties. I don't know why people dance the way they dance or why some of them enjoy the taste of the poison water. I don't know the details of what happened to Max, even

though I make sure she knows she can talk to me about it anytime she needs to. I don't get why the mouth-breathers tried to do what they did. There's so much I still don't know about people.

But after all the events of that night, there's a lot I *do* know. I know that Hopper isn't only a great teacher and caretaker, but he's a fantastic cop too. I know that despite being popular and sporty, Steve Harrington is one of the best people in Hawkins. I know that Max is stronger than people give her credit for. And I know that maybe the two of us need Girls Nights too. The boys are great, and I love them, but there are some fears they'll just never understand. No matter what happens, they won't have been there that night. As time passes they all find out what happened, but they will never understand what it was like in that room. Not like Max and I do.

It's the one thing I wish I didn't understand.

Author's Note:

So...what did you all think?